

## **Engaging the Unengaged: Widening the Scope of Community Education for Democratic Criticism**

**By  
William Al-Sharif**

In 'Community Education: Towards a Theoretical Analysis', Ian Martin speaks of the 'lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical coherence' regarding community education. This leads to vague generalisations in theory and language and is manifested in the approaches of community education to engaging minority ethnic communities on contemporary British issues. The aim of this article, therefore, is to emphasise the importance of minority ethnic communities taking part in democratic criticism. By democratic criticism I mean questioning cultural and political paradigms by democratic means.

Let me give some relevant examples. I have been invited to seminars to talk about issues related to Islam and Muslims in Britain where I was surprised to notice the absence of Muslim attendees. I assumed that either Muslim scholars had not been invited or they had refused to attend. On other occasions, I met British scholars of Asian and African origins who work at institutions for Oriental and African studies and take almost no part in debates on cultural, historical, political and economic problems in Britain. I also observed that community educators find it difficult to understand religious issues and deal with minority ethnic communities particularly when it comes to religion, ethics and politics. There is also a reluctance to challenge ideas and practices of ethnic and religious cultures for the fear of being accused of racism.

I would argue that the principal dilemma facing education for democracy and active citizenship is intellectual and cultural rather than political or economic. I mean that intellectual assumptions and culture have greater influence on the course of community education than the government's political and economic policy. It is true that community education tends to strengthen the process of democracy in our country by providing critical awareness and empowering individuals and groups to be active citizens. There is also a feeling, especially among dissident intellectuals and activists, that the essential involvement of critical education necessitates opposition to official power and repressive structures, and that the work of community education theorists and practitioners consists of challenging systems and setting up constructive orientations and policies. But this version of education is rarely seen in connection with cultural authority and intellectual hegemony. I mean that theorists and practitioners do not see how their community education enhances and preserves the culture and the social structure that produced it. This makes community education unable to critically examine the assumptions and principles on which its work is based.

Because of the current war on terror and national security concerns, the government has proposed programmes for engagement with minority ethnic communities, particularly Muslim communities. But the problem with these programmes is that they create cultural romanticism rather than forms of critical disclosure that exposes official policies and searches for justice, democracy, enlightenment and freedom.

To be more specific, one needs to examine the idea of community engagement and multiculturalism as represented by policy makers and official institutions. It seems to me that the official invention of British tradition and identity has acquired an affirmative intellectual and cultural model that inclines to control, exclude and select. The notion that there is a homogenous, unified British culture falsifies the actual history of this country. Thus, theories of community education need to broaden their theoretical perspectives and realise the significance of intellectual engagement and cultural interaction. It is true that the tendency of community and academic education is to acknowledge intellectual plurality and cultural diversity, but it is no longer desirable to romanticise communities and exclude intellectual and cultural discourses because they do not uphold certain norms and values that politicians and journalists attribute to British culture. Without broader community consultation and genuine participation in debates and community planning, community education agencies and academic institutions will yield to pressures to conform to cynical culture and oppressive policies.

The trouble with approaches of community education to knowledge and culture is that it provides a simplistic model of education that has been engrained in British society. Practice or expertise in popular culture and in some community agencies has become an anti-intellectual and anti-democratic device. The packaged information, which the government and powerful media produce, is prone to control our thought and fit into short forms that persuade misinformation and submission. Choices, exclusions, priorities and the history of human situations are brushed off as insignificant. Thus, we need to widen our understanding of many perspectives and representations. When education theorists and practitioners pay attention to a wide range of intellectual discourses and cultural practices, they will be able to insert new values and ideas in their work. No intellectual or cultural discourse is able to achieve social justice and economic equality and challenge formidable structures and policies on its own terms. This means that a new approach is needed to incorporate a continuing and dynamic process of intellectual and cultural dialogue. We need not think that the advocacy of community rights, such as the rights to cultural and religious practices, will lead to social disintegration.

But confusion, miscommunication and a sense of cultural hegemony take place in educational approaches to different communities and groups. These approaches view certain British citizens as the 'other' and are inclined to overlook cultural practices, historical circumstances and political ideas. Actually, various minority ethnic groups wish to manage their cultural, educational, linguistic and religious practices on their own terms. There may be a wish to question conditions set by the experts who think, for example, that these minority ethnic groups do not adhere to a secularist paradigm and to British values of liberty. Indeed, the assertion of cultural and religious rights should not preclude intellectual engagement and cultural exchange and adaptation.

Proposals for decentralisation, diversity and devolution of control ascending from grass-roots level should be encouraged to bring different voices to politicians and official institutions. These voices should be heard because they express human values that are often silenced by political structures and dominant ideologies. But, unfortunately, the current system of education is largely set within capitalist, consumerist relations and influenced by the dehumanising forces of globalisation, the 'free market' and imperialist objectives. Although the cultural diversity of communities is recognised, the social and cultural identities of these communities have little value in a country ruled by a

domineering culture. This means that the values and interests of community organisations and academic institutions are linked into hegemonic culture, while the members of certain groups find their interests misrepresented and missing from education. Many individuals and groups feel alienated, characterless, detached and powerless in the face of cultural marginalisation and social indifference. Thus, the civic organisations and academic institutions should be places of encouragement and support for those people who are perceived different from the majority.

Community education agencies and academic institutions should involve various individuals and groups in its theorisation and work. This is not merely to express superficial admiration of cultures and communicate their work to people, but to draw on a wide range of expertise, knowledge and cultural practices to shape their theory and work, and make it relevant to the experience of people from different cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, minority ethnic communities should realise that it is in their national and cultural interests to be actively engaged in democratic criticism. They should not turn into informants whose work is aimed only at providing information about their original societies. Without question, education should persuade a whole range of choices contributing to cultural, economic, intellectual and political development.

Although we live in a democratic country, the tendency of the government and official institutions is to view their cultural assumptions and educational policies with a preference for homogeneity and centralisation. There is, for example, a generalised conception of homogenous British values and secular culture. It is evident that there are psychological and intellectual obstacles facing community education dealing with people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. This is not to say that the minority ethnic communities in Britain are not involved in some kind of community education, but it seems that the official version of community education is modelled and permitted in a way that does not upset elitist control over authority and the production of knowledge.

Scholars, educators and activists should encourage a wide spectrum of ideas about what critical citizenship means and what responsible citizens do. They should examine the orthodox theories of community education and make its practice more relevant to issues that matter. We should be aware of the cultural and ideological presumptions underlying the interpretation of problems that we discuss at our meetings. The conservative and ideological perception of citizenship inserted in official efforts at education expresses political options with political consequences. Education for democracy needs to promote democratic criticism and a critical understanding of the knowledge of authority and stimulate the development of discussions on the relationship between culture, knowledge and power. This requires a radical transformation from perceiving minority ethnic communities from an ideological perspective to a worthwhile position that motivates intellectual and cultural engagement.

## References

Martin, Ian (1987). 'Community Education: Towards a Theoretical Analysis', in G. Allen, J. Bastiani, I. Martin and J. Richards (eds), *Community Education: An Agenda for Educational Reform*, pp. 9-32. Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press.